



A Synchronic Approach to Kinyarwanda Variation Among its Native Speakers



Bazimaziki Gabriel ^a

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Abstract

One of the important and good things for Rwanda is that its people share the same language which implies the same culture. Like many other languages, Kinyarwanda exhibits some variants but this does not impede communication among them. This paper examined Kinyarwanda variants among its native speakers. The question of sociolinguistics main concern is discussed here. Kinyarwanda language sound variants and differences in present verb tense markers based on region factor is discussed. Synchronic approach was used to cement discussion. The study stemmed from the interaction I have had with some of friends and colleagues from different parts of the country. When I usually heard some discussions at different occasions, like ceremonials, social media, meetings, churches and on road, I realized that Kinyarwanda, the only language common to all Rwandans, has some linguistic variations. It was demonstrated that accent from some areas in the northern and western parts of the country differs from the one used for academic and professional purposes. It was also found that like many other languages, Kinyarwanda is concerned with the sociolinguists' belief that some polite language ranges among language variations since words mean different things to different people.

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Author correspondence:

Bazimaziki Gabriel,

University of Rwanda-College of Education

Department of Humanities and Language Education Rwanda

Email address: bazimazikigabriel@yahoo.com

1. Introduction

Language, culture and society are three elements that cannot be distanced completely. Language is a human system of communication which serves as a medium of expression as it facilitates exchange of thoughts, ideas and emotions through verbal communication. In his "A finite System", Noam Chomsky echoed that language is a process of free creation; its laws and principles are fixed, but the manner in which these principles of generation are used is free and infinitely varied. He adds that even the interpretation and use of words involves a process of free creation. The field of Sociolinguistics is concerned with the point made here. As a broad area, Sociolinguistics is concerned with the description of many different ways of studying and using language.

^a University of Rwanda-College of Education Department of Humanities and Language Education Rwanda

Sociolinguists posed questions about sociolinguistics main concern and concluded that it deals with how individual speakers use language or how people use language differently in different towns or regions (Meyerhoff, 2006). Bantu languages, specifically Kinyarwanda, are not exception. Socio-linguistically, say Rwigamba, Nkusi and Ruzindana (1998) with particular interest in Rwandan national territory, one country means one language. Spoken mostly in Rwanda and its neighbouring parts, Kinyarwanda has some regional variations among its native speakers but still communication among them take place successfully since it is the common code among them. In this regard, this study examined critically linguistic variables that are often time encountered in its use. Language variations are triggered by a variety of factors including education, income, occupation, age, gender, region among others. Such factors cannot have room in this study. Rather, the researcher has given a room to regional factor and, to a certain extent, to some social factors. The researcher considered that the primary function of language is to enable people interact among themselves. The researcher considered the view of Morgan (2003) who opines that speech community cannot be defined by static physical location since membership can be experienced as part of a nation-state, neighborhood, village, club, compound, on-line chat room, religious institution, and so on.

Background and Literature

Every research project starts with an idea; something that the researcher is interested in knowing more about or is worried about; something that is perceived as a problem or as a knowledge gap that needs to be filled (Hewitt, Qtd in Bazimaziki, 2017). A study on Kinyarwanda language variants is concerned with the point raised here. The researcher took interest in Kinyarwanda as their mother tongue, a language that characterizes Rwandese same culture since language and culture are two interwoven elements. Kinyarwanda is a common language to all Rwandan people and is used as an official language besides English, French and Swahili. Hands (2013) notes that Kinyarwanda is “the language most widely spoken in Rwanda,” and with the exception of Kiswahili, it is believed “to have the largest group of speakers among the Bantu languages in the region”. Habyarimana (2006) advocates that Kinyarwanda is regarded as the first language for most Rwandans, and an official national language but not everybody is able to conduct a natural conversation in it. *Ikinyarwanda*, or *Kinyarwanda*, sometimes referred to as *rwanda*, is a Bantu language of the inter lacustrine zone. *Kinyarwanda* could mean etymologically *the thing of Rwanda*, *the thing that belongs to Rwanda* since the morpheme *-nya-* means “belonging to”. *Kinyarwanda* means more than just the language since that language refers to the Rwandan culture, the habits and customs of the country (Rwigamba et al. qtd in Bazimaziki & Bisamaza, 2017). However, while Rwandese people have that chance to share the same language and the same culture as well, there are linguistic variants – sounds variants and verb present tense variants based on region. To some extent, semantic variants are also encountered in that language particularly as a result of Rwandan social values. In the same vein, there is another idea to posit here that because language is a cultural system, individual languages may classify objects and ideas in completely different fashions. As Gallois et al. (2005) explain that the sex or age of the speaker may determine the use of certain grammatical forms or avoidance of taboo words, Kinyarwanda language applies. In most regions, it is a taboo for a sister-in-law to say her husbands’ parents’ names. Failure to uphold this value is commonly considered as disrespect vis-à-vis the parents. This often times leads them to look for a new term that could not offend the parents-in-law. From the two perspectives, I wanted to carry out a study aiming to critically analyse the linguistic variables in this language which has had a wider speech community in the whole country, in its neighbouring countries and even beyond the region since the country has had a wider diaspora worldwide.

Review on dialectology

Sociolinguistics is a branch of Linguistics which is concerned with language and society. Dialectology is one of the subfields of sociolinguistics which studies linguistic dialects or variations in language based primarily on geographic distribution and their associated features. Chambers and Trudgill (1998) content that dialectology is concerned with dialect and dialects referred to as substandard, low-status, often rustic form of language, generally associated with peasantry, the working class or other groups lacking prestige while Szmrecsanyi (2014) posited that dialectology is predominantly concerned with phonetic, phonological and lexical variation. As such, different languages, dialects, accents etc., are part of linguistic aspects. Sociolinguistic variation and standard variety of language have had a enough room for discussion in Linguistic field and it is argued that many times the term standard is associated with academic language or the one used for professional purposes while the term dialects is often times associated with the non-standard variety of language. Inherently, linguistic and sociolinguistic studies

in particular, do not discriminate between what is standard and what is not as their discussions are concerned with, but are not limited to, both language history (diachronic approach) and description of language, its use in a particular community at a given time (synchronic approach or descriptive linguistics). Thus, both standard and all that is viewed as non-standard forms of language can have a room in the realm of linguistic studies. Individuals may speak their mother tongue differently and these differences among groups of speakers in the same speech community cannot be undermined. According to Meyerhoff (2006:52), language variations constitute its dialects, a term widely applied to what are considered sub-varieties of a single language and often times referred to as distinctive features at the level of pronunciation and vocabulary and sentence structure; or accents referring only to how speakers pronounce words. The linguistic variables are those where the meaning remain constant but form varies. In English, for example, like *cat* and *pussy* have the same social meaning but different forms. A Linguistic variable is also defined as a linguistic unit with two or more variants, which can occur in precisely the same environment without producing a difference of meaning. Kimenyi (n.d) discussed linguistic variation and came up with an idea that it is very active and found in all areas of Kinyarwanda grammar such as lexicon, phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics. He concluded that each form or structure can have alternates with the same concept or function. In other words, there are various linguistic variables in different languages, (r), (th), (- ing) in English language for example; (cy), (gy), (shy), in Kinyarwanda, (r) in French language, to name a few of them. Each variable has two or more *variants*, which may be discrete (e.g. th) or continuous (e.g. vowels); may be zero or non-zero (e.g. r); For example, Labov (1972) makes the point clear referring to the distribution of post-vocalic /r/ in varieties of English, e.g. British Received Pronunciation(BBC) versus New York City; when he saw how linguistic environments affect its pronunciation, e.g. *linking R* before a vowel; learned why some R-less speakers have *intrusive R* (over-generalizing the pattern of linking R), e.g. *ideaR of it*. As such, he concluded that /r/ could be variable in form (present or absent) but constant in meaning, e.g. *yard/yahd* thus a linguistic variable, (R). Other examples include (th), varying between [θ] and [t] in *three/t'ree*; in kinyarwanda (cy) varying between [tʃ] and [ky], (jy) varying between [ʒ] and [gy], (shy) varying between [ʃ] and [ʃ ~], the pronunciation of [L] versus [R] in French and so forth. While Kimenyi (n.d) explored lexical variation in Kinyarwanda, he mainly focused on grammaticization at work but did not tackle the sound variation of the types mentioned above. As such, this study intended to add on what he came up with as Kinyarwanda variations are concerned.

Objectives and research questions

The primary objective of this study was to demonstrate that Kinyarwanda exhibits variations within its speech community. The secondary objectives were the following: To apply descriptive approach to Kinyarwanda language and to show that language and culture of a given community cannot be disconnected. The study was guided by the following questions: Does Kinyarwanda exhibit variants within its speech community; to what extent can descriptive approach apply in Kinyarwanda studies; and how far does, Kinyarwanda language use reflect Rwandan culture?

From the above questions stemmed an assumption that Kinyarwanda displays variants based on regional and social factors particularly the pronunciation of some consonants and ungrammatical extension verb tense on the one hand; avoidance semantic/lexical features occasioned by the social values and taboos on the other hand.

2. Research Methods

This study examined variations in Kinyarwanda language. The researcher used descriptive approach often times termed as Synchronic approach. It holds that all languages are equally right when analysed descriptively, seeking to clarify the nature of language, describing how people use it and find the underlying grammar that speakers unconsciously adhere to. The researcher's choice of the approach goes with the position of prescriptive linguists who do not agree with "the notion of incorrect usage" of language. Thus, the approach resembles other scientific methodology in other discipline as it is concerned with what people say, when and how and why but not whether they should or should not say it. The study used a qualitative research design. Purposive sampling technique was used and convenience sample of daily spoken language by people from Kinyarwanda speech community particularly Rwandese people was selected. Primary sources i.e. spoken by Kinyarwanda users were the main corpora in this study. Secondary sources consisted of the quotations from different materials dealing with sociolinguistics, linguistic variables in particular. The study was limited by the results that cannot be generalized as it was conducted on a small sample occasioned by regional linguistic variables. Another drawback consisted of lack of funds to carry out a very wide research that could involve deep interview with people from

Kinyarwanda speech community. The latter was considered basing on [Morgan \(2003\)](#) who argues that it often incorporates shifts in attitudes and usage and that the notion of language that binds it is constructed around several major theories regarding language as a social construct. As such, I resorted to some words as collected from some public media and from different people with whom I usually interacted in Kinyarwanda speaking settings. Analysis of corpora based on [Meyerhoff \(2006\)](#), too, who contended that Sociolinguistics is a very broad field, and it can be used to describe many different ways of studying language; that sociolinguists may have rather different interests from each other and they may use very different methods for collecting and analysing data. The researcher took into consideration another linguistic leading assumption that Sociolinguistics is concerned with how individual speakers use language; how people use language differently in different towns or regions and about how a nation decides what languages will be recognised for official purposes ([Meyerhoff, 2006:1](#)).

3. Results and Analysis

Kinyarwanda is a Bantu language spoken in a narrow area of Africa. In East Africa, it is spoken to a very low extent in Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda by people of Rwandan origin who might have emigrated for different reasons. In central Africa, one hears it in Burundi, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Used by people in culturally and linguistically diverse areas, it provides a wide continuum of dialects. Kinyarwanda according to [Twiringiyimana \(2001\)](#) derived from the southern part of the country. Language variation was the main focus in this paper and could not include all areas where Kinyarwanda language is spoken. Like in other languages, in Kinyarwanda linguistic variables may involve social class and gender, occupation, education, region, etc. The accent of people from northern part of the country differ in speech from those in the rest of the country. Many of these differences are mostly the pronunciation of the sounds. I focused on the four important categories of linguistic variables such as sound variation, semantic, noun substitution (pronoun as noun substituent), and the verb extension (suffix). Sound /tʃ/ versus /ky/ and /ʃ/ versus /ʃ̃/. In the same connection, their speech differs at the level of the sound /ʒ/ versus /gy/, /d/ versus /t/; /nɲ/ versus /nk/, /gu/ versus /wu/ and to some extent /gy/ versus /ry/, /mb/ versus /mp/. The suffix -ga which is added ungrammatically to the present verb tense is another variant that cannot be left out among some Kinyarwanda speakers from Northern part of the country. Some people say that it is because that region is neighbouring Kisoro district of Uganda whereby the sounds mentioned above are encountered to a great extent. I realized that it depends on social classes. For example, Northern peasants are used to using the suffix-ga in their present verb tense form. These variants are encountered in various situations such as sports occasions, churches, marketplace, on road, some public media etc. Most of these variants are emphasized by [Mazimpaka \(2008\)](#), a Rwandan artist, in his inclusive and fascinating album “Ica Mbere” (The first one) [translation is mine] particularly in his song “Igikosi” (meaning a cup) [translation is my own]. Putting an emphasis on the accent of some northern Kinyarwanda speech community, his song is a good contribution to showing how Kinyarwanda exhibits some language variations. Take for example some words he used as shown below;

Northern accent	Standard Kinyarwanda
Igikoôsi(a cup)	Igikoômbe
Nii icaâ nde? (Who will win?)	Nii icyaâ nde?
Nii ndê uzâakijaana? (who will win the cup)	Nii ndê uzâakijyaana
Amaceênga gashuushe (fascinating dribbles)	Amaceênga ashyûushye
Amakiîpe ga acakiranye(teams are playing)	Amakiîpe ya acakiranye
Aragûteye[.....] guba guragarutse(he kicks the ball and it goes back)	Arawûteeye[.....] uba uragarutse

Inherently, educated people from the same region strives to speak standard Kinyarwanda [as learnt in school and used as official]. To illustrate, one can consider the following dialogue between a Community Radio journalist and kids from one district in Northern province.(It is not a full dialogue but we only focus on sentences that brings interest here).

Journalist: Mwumva Radio? (Do you listen to Radio?)

Kids: Turayum**vaga**. (Instead of saying **turayumva**) meaning “yes, we do”

Journalist: Mwaba se mujya gusenga? (do you sometimes go to church) ?

Kids: Ndabwo tujagayo (instead of saying **ntabwo tujyayo** meaning “we don’t go there”

Journalist: Mukunda umupira w'amaguru? (Do you play football)?

Kids: Twuragukundaga cane (Instead of turawukunda cyane meaning "we like it very much" [...]).

The above part of a long dialogue that took place between a local journalist and children may provide some of the differences between the two different groups of people as far as their social classes, occupation, and education are concerned. As one can see, the journalist speak Kinyarwanda which is standard at national level while children speak the language of uneducated people. The fact that those children and the journalist don't speak the same sound whereas they originate from the same region may be a result of the different background. A journalist is educated but children were not. As such, there is a room to conclude that though northern people are used to articulate the sounds /ʒ/ / /tʃ/ ; /ʃ/ and /nz/ instead of /ky/, /gy/, /ʃ~/, /ns/ which are said to be accepted in phonetics of Kinyarwanda language, one can say that social class dictates, educational background and occupation in particular. Similarly, northern accent contrasts with southern, eastern, and even western Kinyarwanda in the sounds mentioned above as shown in the table below. Some of these words (standard pronunciation) were collected from Mutake (1990) wherein Kinyarwanda phonetics and phonology is discussed with some ample examples.

Northern pronunciation	Standard Pronunciation
/tʃ/ as in: icoôndo(mud), Iceênda (nine), Caangwâ (or), Caane caane (especially)	/kʃ/ : icyoôndo Icyênda, cyaangwâ, cyaane cyaan
/ʃ/ in: ishaamba (forest), Isharî (jealousy), kwiishura(pay), harashûushe (it is hot)	/ʃ/ : ishyaamba, ishyarî, Kwiishyura, harashyûushye
/ʒ/ in: kuja (to go) Amajaambere (development), Amajâaruguru (North)	/jy/ : Kujya, amajyaambere, amajyâaruguru
/nd/ in: ndaa ndaambara yaandeêra ubwâoba (There is no war that I can fear)	/nt/ : ntaa ntaambara yaanteêra, intaama,
Ubwâoba, indaama(sheep), indêbe(chair)	Intêbe
/nj/ as in : ingoni (stick), ingâ (cow) , ingwâano (dowry)	/nk/ : inkoni, inkâ, ingwâano
/mb/ as in: imbû (skins), imbuuha (rumours) Imbâano(gift)	/mp/ : impû, impuuha, Impâano
/gy/ : ibigyô, igyîinyo (tooth)	/ry/ : ibiryô, iryîinyo (tooth)
/nz/ in : inzîinzi (victory), kôonza (breastfeed)	/nts/ or /ns/ : insîinzi, kôonsa

From the above examples, one may conclude that the northern pronunciation differs from the others in the semi vowel /y/ when it is clustered with other sounds. Northern and its neighbouring Western part Kinyarwanda speakers ignore it not because they do not know how to spell words containing that sound, but because their pronunciation dictates it due to reasons that are still under investigation. Women, too, from northern part of the country try their best to be closer to Kinyarwanda that is said to be standard. When you listen to them, their pronunciation of (CY) is nearer to [KY] but not (tʃ), while their way of articulating (JY) is not [ʒ] but the standard pronunciation [gy] (cf. the above comparison table between northern accent and the rest). In connection with this point, there is another idea to posit here. Because language is a cultural system, individual languages may classify objects and ideas in completely different fashions. For example, according to Gallois et al. (2005), the sex or age of the speaker may determine the use of certain grammatical forms or avoidance of taboo words. For example, in Rwandan context, most of women avoids to use vocabularies related to their grandmothers/fathers in law. If the grandmother is called Nyirabijumba, for example, the daughter in law would never pronounce ikijumba (Potato). Rather, she would name it otherwise and say for example, Ikigabari (to denote a big potato). More examples of this category include but are not limited to:

People's names	Variable	Diction(polite variant)
Nyiraburo	Uburô(millet)	Ubwiita(millet)
Sehene	Ihenê(goat)	Itûungo (domestic animal)
Sentama	Intaama (sheep)	Itûungo(domestic animal)
Bapfaguheka	Guheeka(carry on back)	Gufûreba(dress someone)
Kanyamanza	inyaâmaanza(wagtail).	Inyoni(bird)
Nyirazuba	Izûuba(The sun)	Urumuri(light)
Semanza	Imaânza(cases)	Inkûiko(courts)

As can be seen in the above table, social norms are among the language variables in Kinyarwanda language. In fact, some languages even have different words for the same thing that have to be chosen depending on what the politeness and respect relationship is between the speakers (Meyerhoff, 2006: 82). Among Kinyarwanda native speakers, paying respect to the parents-in-law, especially for women, is one of the leading aspects of Rwandan culture. While Sentama is commonly known as a Rwandan name, it should be a serious offence for a sister-in-law to pronounce the word “intaama” (sheep) and words derived from it while her father in law is named Sentama. The culture holds it that doing it would be going against social values, i.e. showing lack of respect to the elders. The same social rule applies for the names such as “Kanyamanza” derived from “inyamanza” (wagtail). In that situation, the sister-in-law should forge a related general but not particular term and say “inyoni” (bird) instead. Of course, this cultural variation is useful as it goes with Rwandan women culture of paying more respect in parenthood especially to people with whom women have more restricted relationships and with whom they are less well acquainted.

4. Conclusion

This study was primarily concerned with Kinyarwanda linguistic variation among its speech community in Rwanda. The researcher intended to answer the question “how far can a language exhibit variety within the same speech community?” The study used descriptive approach often times termed synchronic approach. The choice of the approach goes with the position that it resembles other scientific methodology in other disciplines as it is concerned with what people say, when and how and why but not whether they should or should not say it. Two assumptions drove this study: (1) all languages are equally right when analysed descriptively, seeking to clarify the nature of language and describe how people use it and find the underlying grammar that speakers unconsciously adhere to. (2) Sociolinguistics is concerned with how individual speakers use language; how people use language differently in different towns or regions and about how a nation decides what languages will be recognised for official purposes. As research is a time, energy and money consuming activity, one of the drawbacks I faced is lack of funds to go to the field for data collection. The researcher analysed the data as collected here and there in speakers’ language as drawn in social media, people’s conversations and daily talks etc. The reason was the researcher was limited by financial constraints to access a wider field for data collection that could involve more research tools including interviews with various people. Despite the drawbacks, analysis revealed that there are variations in Kinyarwanda based on some vowel sounds pronunciation and present tense verb extension. It was also found that respect is a language variant dictated by social values among Rwandan People, among the in-laws in particular. Elsewhere, Frye (1971) noted that it is generally accepted that a critic is a better judge of the value of a text than its creator, but there is still a lingering notion that it is somehow ridiculous to regard the critic as the final judge of its meaning, even though in practice it is clear that he must be. I agree with him and contend that I am not the last judge. What I discussed here may not be exhaustive in some ways as language is as broad as a sea. As this study based on a small sample that cannot allow for generalisation, I recommend that a similar study be conducted involving enough funds and considerable sample and a number of research tools to bridge the gaps that may be perceived in the present paper.

Conflict of interest statement and funding sources

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Statement of authorship

The author has a responsibility for the conception and design of the study. The author has approved the final article.


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Biography of Author

	INSTITUTION AND LOCATION	DEGREE	YEAR(s)	FIELD OF STUDY
	University of Rwanda (Formerly National University of Rwanda)/ Rwanda	Bachelor	2001-2005	English
	Kampala University /Uganda	Master	2011-2013	Education in English and Literature
	University of Rwanda, College of Education/ Rwanda	PGCLTHE(Po st Graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education	2017	Education
	University of Rwanda- College of Education	PhD	2017	Pending
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